

Washington's Nighttime Seat Belt Enforcement Project

Washington State has consistently been a national leader in seat belt use, particularly since 2002 and the adoption of Washington's Click it or Ticket project.

This high seat belt use is resulting in:

- reductions in the numbers of people who die each year in vehicle collisions,
- big reductions in the numbers of people seriously hurt, and
- cost savings for society. According to research, the medical expenses for people who don't buckle up average \$11,000 more per crash than people who wear seat belts.

Recently, Washington was picked by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to conduct a special pilot project to test the outcome of conducting seat belt patrols at night. The reason for this is that nighttime driving is much more dangerous than daytime driving. The traffic fatality rate is at least four times higher at night. And research shows that there is more risky driving behavior at night:

- drunk and drug-impaired driving,
- driving at high speeds,
- drowsy driving,
- reckless and negligent driving.

Research also shows that seat belt use at night is lower. Improving nighttime seat belt use will lower the nighttime traffic deaths and injuries. Putting the extra law enforcement patrols – available through the Click it or Ticket project funding – out at night, will hopefully impact the other risky driving that takes place, such as the drunk driving, drugged driving and drowsy driving.

It is not easy for law enforcement to see unbuckled motorists at night – so it takes a special kind of enforcement. The enforcement involves the use of an observing officer (who might or might not be in uniform) – who is positioned at a location where there is good available lighting and where traffic normally slows. An intersection where there is a lot of traffic is one example; or an off-ramp from a freeway.

When the observing officer sees an unbuckled motorist, he radio's ahead to a contact officer who then makes the stop. For this reason nighttime seat belt patrols require the work of several officers.

The first big nighttime seat belt emphasis effort took place in May, 2006. 75 police and sheriff agencies participated, as well as the Washington State Patrol statewide. There were 358 patrols in 358 different locations and each involved, on average, three officers.

Those patrols intercepted:

- 706 drivers who were either driving recklessly, aggressively or without a license

- 325 drivers who were either drunk, drug-impaired or arrested for a drug or alcohol violation
- 182 drivers who were arrested for criminal behavior (either felony arrests, felony warrants or other criminal citations)
- 8 stolen cars were recovered
- And there were 4,671 people cited for being unbuckled or having an unbuckled child in the vehicle.

Officers were surprised at the number of drivers who were cited for having unbuckled children in their cars – but research shows that people who buckle up are more likely to make their kids buckle up. And the corollary to that: people who don't buckle up, tend to let their children ride unbuckled, too.

Additional nighttime seat belt patrols will be taking place through May, 2008 – after which time the project will be scientifically evaluated.

Big enforcement campaigns have taken place in May and October, 2007 and another one is planned for May, 2008. In addition, enforcement efforts are being conducted in various areas of the state between those dates, too.

The important messages for drivers:

- Wear your seat belt. A seat belt will reduce your chance of dying in a collision by 45% and reduce your chance of being seriously hurt by 69%.
- Make sure your children are properly buckled up in a child restraint that is appropriate for their age and size:
 - Infant seats for infants
 - Child car seats with the five point harness for kids up to about age 4
 - Booster seats for kids up to age 8 or 4'9" tall.
 - And remember – up to age 13, kids need to ride in the back seat.

Between 1995 and 1998, there were, on average, 540 people (vehicle occupants) killed in Washington collisions. After the Click it or Ticket project began -- from 2003 through 2006 -- there were, on average, 452 people killed – a difference of 88 people each year in Washington.

Research shows that for every person killed, there are about five people severely hurt, so this means seat belt promotional efforts are preventing about 2,260 severe injuries each year. The medical costs for one unbuckled, injured car crash victim averages \$11,000 more per incident, so seat belt efforts are reducing medical costs by about \$24.8 million each year in Washington. The research also shows that these medical costs are paid for in large part by tax-supported systems.

Fewer people dead. Fewer people severely hurt. Big cost savings for taxpayers. And bad drivers (people who are unlicensed, uninsured, drunk and driving dangerously) are being intercepted by law enforcement as a result of this project.